

# Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes

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## Abstract

Scholars and policymakers have identified neighborhood activism and participation as a valuable source of policy information and civic engagement. Yet, these venues may be biasing policy discussions in favor of an unrepresentative group of individuals. Using the case of housing policy, we compile a novel data set on all citizen participants in Planning and Zoning Board meetings concerning the development of multiple housing units in 97 Massachusetts cities and towns. We match these thousands of individuals to the Massachusetts voter file to descriptively investigate local political participation. We find that individuals who are older, male, longtime residents, voters in local elections, and homeowners are significantly more likely to participate in these meetings. These individuals are overwhelmingly likely to oppose new housing construction, and cite a wide variety of reasons. These participatory inequalities have important policy implications and may be contributing to rising housing costs.

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Many local leaders view neighborhood activism and participation as a key source of policy information and a critical form of civic engagement. Almost half of mayors selected neighborhood meetings as one of the top two ways they learn about their constituents' views (Einstein, Glick, and LeBlanc 2017), and the National League of Cities (Hoene, Kingsley, and Leighninger 2013) highlighted neighborhood meetings as a critical component of community engagement. The celebration of neighborhood participation is not new. President Jimmy Carter made it a cornerstone of his administration's housing programs (Carter 1980). Scholars of local government, and normative theorists more broadly, contend that institutions that spur neighborhood-based political participation help provide voice to underrepresented groups, enhance citizen efficacy, and are integral to a thriving democracy (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993; Fung 2006; Michels and Graaf 2010). Moreover, such institutions may offer opportunities for compromise via deliberative democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 2012). Indeed, the local level may offer the most potential to benefit from such institutions as participation and efficacy are greater in smaller jurisdictions (Oliver 2001; Lassen and Serritzlew 2011; Oliver, Ha, and Callen 2012).

In some ways, local institutions that enable direct citizen involvement echo national efforts to increase political participation among socioeconomically disadvantaged voters. In response to participatory inequalities, some policymakers and advocates have pursued a variety of initiatives designed to facilitate registration, offer more early voting, and shorten lines at polling places, for example. These policies may, however, have unanticipated consequences. In some cases, they may exacerbate the very inequities they attempt to solve. Berinsky (2005) finds that reforms designed to facilitate voting actually *increase* socioeconomic inequalities in turnout; de Kadt (2017) uncovers a similar phenomenon in South Africa. Burden et al. (2013) discover that, while Election Day registration has a positive effect on overall turnout, early voting appears to decrease turnout in isolation.

Initiatives designed to encourage and empower neighborhood political participation at the local level could also have unexpected or under-appreciated consequences for the distribution

of influence. We examine this possibility using the substantively important case of housing policy. In the wake of the excesses of urban renewal (Rae 2004; Schleicher 2013) and the dominance of pro-growth, developer-oriented urban politics (Logan and Molotch 1987), local governments have promulgated institutions designed to constrain developers and empower neighborhood-level and environmental interests (Logan and Rabrenovic 1990; Gerber and Phillips 2003; Glaeser and Ward 2009; Schleicher 2013). One example is a movement in many localities to allow and encourage neighborhood participation in Zoning and Planning Board meetings concerning housing developments. Such participation offers neighbors an opportunity to inform appointed board members and local elected officials of their views on projects ranging from large developments to modest renovations, and to potentially extract concessions from developers (sometimes directly (Hankinson 2013)). The concentrated costs of development projects, however, offer greater incentives for neighborhood groups that are highly affected by a proposal to mobilize against development than the broader population of a city that might more weakly favor an increased housing supply. Density-limiting and participatory regulations may provide these highly motivated individuals the tools with which to restrict higher density projects.

Housing represents not only a relevant test case of the political impacts of encouraging and enabling neighborhoods to participate, but also a substantively important one. The Obama White House identified national housing affordability as a critical policy challenge, arguing that “the growing severity of undersupplied housing markets is jeopardizing housing affordability for working families, increasing income inequality by reducing less-skilled workers’ access to high-wage labor markets, and stifling GDP growth by driving labor migration away from the most productive regions” (White House 2016). The lack of affordable housing in areas with high mobility could have a profound negative impact on many children’s life opportunities (Chetty, Herdren, and Katz 2016). While housing crises in some of the nation’s coastal cities has been the focus of media attention, a lack of affordable housing is a national crisis. There is not a *single county in the country* in which a minimum-wage earner

can afford a two-bedroom rental (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2017). Housing affordability and supply are inextricably linked. Multiple economists have attributed the current affordability crisis in large part to insufficient supply (Quigley and Rosenthal 2005; Glaeser, Gyourko, and Saks 2005; Gyourko, Saiz, and Summers 2008; Glaeser and Ward 2009; Glaeser 2011; Gyourko and Molloy 2014; Hsieh and Moretti 2015). Moreover, insufficient housing supply may hamper efforts at environmental sustainability. Greater housing density helps reduce sprawl (Glaeser 2011) and is a cornerstone of local efforts to mitigate climate change (Barro 2017).

To assess local political participation, previous studies have relied primarily on surveys (Hankinson 2017; Marble and Nall 2017), voting (Fischel 2001; Gerber and Phillips 2003), case studies of meetings (Mansbridge 1980; Fiorina 1998), and aggregate-level analyses of meeting participation (Fung 2006). In contrast, we rely on directly observing (1) which individuals participate in policy discussions surrounding housing development, and (2) how they participate. We do so across a range of communities by compiling and coding new data on *all* citizen participants in Planning Board and Zoning Board meetings dealing with the construction of multiple housing units in 97 Massachusetts cities and towns. We match these thousands of individual participants to the Massachusetts voter file to descriptively explore who participates in local political meetings.

We find that individuals that are older, male, longtime residents, voters in local elections, and homeowners are more likely to participate in these meetings. Almost two-thirds of these participants speak out in opposition to new housing development. They raise a wide variety of issues, from concerns about local trees to traffic. These results suggest that the structure of public meetings surrounding housing development likely contributes to a failure in many locations to produce a sufficient housing supply.

# 1 Who Participates

A wide body of scholarship in American politics suggests that more socioeconomically advantaged individuals are more likely to politically participate and have their voices amplified in key policy discussions (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Gilens 2014). Political science research also generally finds higher levels of political participation among the elderly, who have the time, resources, and policy interest that allow for and encourage involvement in politics (Campbell 2005; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). Those that have lived in the same place for a greater duration (Kang and Kwak 2003; Gay 2012), and own their homes (Fischel 2001) also participate in politics at higher rates. Men—especially white men—are more likely to engage in direct contact and collective action relative to women (Mansbridge 1980; Kittilson 2016). We suspect these broad findings will also apply to participants in neighborhood meetings. This would fit with research on participatory small-group decision processes that contends that such institutions are unrepresentative in similar ways to other forms of political participation (Mansbridge 1980; Sanders 1997)

Moreover, the nature of housing developments may disproportionately spur participation among individuals with unrepresentative opinions. The potential externalities of housing proposals are spatially concentrated while the benefits are diffuse. Proposed housing developments have potentially profound effects on *neighborhood* property values, amenities, and quality of life (Fischel 2001). Not only do they affect their neighbors' economic interests, but housing developments, in many cases, comprise stark changes in neighborhood environments and composition. Studies of racial and ethnic politics have found such rapid changes to be strong motivators for attitudes and behavior (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998; Hopkins 2010; Enos 2016).

The potential for neighborhood economic effects and changes may independently affect the participation of those in the small group of highly affected individuals. First, we expect meeting attendees to be overwhelmingly weighted towards *opposing* new housing development. New housing constitutes an obvious and rapid change, and thus might trigger

attendant negative psychological responses to change. What’s more, an ample body of economics research suggests that increasing the housing supply reduces housing prices (Quigley and Rosenthal 2005; Glaeser, Gyourko, and Saks 2005; Gyourko, Saiz, and Summers 2008; Glaeser and Ward 2009; Glaeser 2011; Gyourko and Molloy 2014; Hsieh and Moretti 2015). A reduction in housing prices would adversely impact the economic interests of local homeowners. Interestingly, renters may also feel that new housing developments are detrimental to their economic interests. Recent experimental evidence suggests that renters believe that new developments will raise their rents (Hankinson 2017).

In contrast, we anticipate that proponents of new housing development will be comparatively less likely to attend meetings surrounding these policies. The economic benefits of new housing supply are diffuse; any change in housing affordability from a single project is likely to be barely perceptible, particularly when weighed against the visible costs experienced by a narrower subset of the neighborhood. What’s more, at least some of the individuals most likely to benefit from a new housing development live outside the jurisdiction in which the development is proposed. In contrast, virtually all of those experiencing the costs of new housing already reside in that jurisdiction. Relative to supporters, then, housing development opponents are more likely to: (1) be informed about developments happening in their community and (2) be able to target their own appointed/elected officials in voicing their views about housing. Both information (Lassen 2005) and efficacy (Shingles 1981; Finkel 1985) are positively associated with political participation.

Second, we also anticipate that those who participate will do so with inordinately high intensity and frequency. The factors listed above that should disproportionately spur opposition to local housing development will likely also foment *strong* public opinions. Intense viewpoints are linked with a greater propensity for political participation (Fiorina 1998; Pew Research Center 2014). Therefore, we expect meeting attendees in general—and, in particular, opponents of new housing development—to be more likely to attend repeat meetings.

Third, we expect meeting participants to cite concerns specific to the demographics

of their community. Residents of outlying locations, for example, might worry more about wetlands and septic systems or preservation of character. People in rapidly growing locations might express more concerns over density and congestion. In short, community challenges should be reflected in the comments individuals raise at these meetings. This expectation follows both from the underlying potential for real problems as well as the local concerns that might make such appeals more effective.

Perhaps strikingly in the context of rising national partisan polarization (Abramowitz 2010), we do not expect partisanship to predict participation in housing meetings or to affect the issues that individuals raise. While partisanship certainly impacts local politics (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Einstein and Kogan 2016), we anticipate that the immediacy of neighborhood-level concerns will swamp partisan leanings on housing issues. Indeed, Marble and Nall (2017) show that low voter support for housing development—even among those concerned about housing affordability—is likely due to voters’ independent attitudes on two dimensions of housing policy: redistribution and development. Without explicitly redistributive primes, citizens’ concerns about development will trump their more ideological views surrounding redistribution.

At the heart of all of these predictions are questions about grass-roots democracy. Throughout our analysis, we consider two competing views about neighborhood-level civic engagement on housing policy. The first is that these meetings are an opportunity for efficacious civic engagement, mediation of competing interests (Dahl 1961; Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993), and deliberative democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 2012). The second, in contrast, views neighborhood activism as captured by a small unrepresentative group with strong views (Mansbridge 1980; Fiorina 1998).

## 2 Data and Methods

To evaluate who participates in local meetings on housing projects, we assemble a novel data set of all citizen participants in Planning Board and Zoning Board meetings between 2015-2017 in 97 cities and towns in metropolitan Boston. We focused on Massachusetts for one simple reason: data availability. As a consequence of MA’s open meeting law, MA localities are required to provide detailed meeting minutes for all public bodies. These minutes must include “a summary of the discussions on each subject;” a majority of cities/towns in metropolitan Boston have interpreted this to mean including the names and addresses of all members of the public who spoke at the meeting. We have found no other set of localities nationally where meeting minutes are comparably detailed.

In addition to the data availability, the Boston metro region has other advantageous traits for studying participation in the hyper local politics of housing development. While compact, the Boston metro area comprises an unusual number of independent cities and towns. Indeed, there are dozens of autonomous local communities with their own demographics, politics, and local regulations within 50 miles of Boston. Boston’s surrounding communities range from small, leafy bedroom towns to more diverse small cities. The housing stock in the area includes estates, starter homes, three family “triple deckers,” and taller apartment buildings. While the eastern Massachusetts economy and housing market are doing quite well relative to other parts of the country, there is still great variation across municipalities in terms of housing demand, availability, and prices. Moreover, the fact that the overall housing market is doing quite well is an asset for this study because it means there is demand for housing and a market for new development and “upzoning.” Furthermore, thanks to the massive coding and collection efforts of Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research and Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston (2005) and Glaeser and Ward (2009), we have access to data on the various (and varied) zoning and land use regulations through the metro area. Lastly, the fact that Eastern Massachusetts is generally liberal makes it a difficult test for some of the hypotheses. It is disproportionately populated by people who would likely tend to support



more housing and efforts at improving access to affordable housing in the abstract.

In Table 1 we provide summary statistics about a variety of traits (mean, minimum and maximum) for the 97 cities and towns for which we have coded meeting comments. As the data show, our sample is, as expected in eastern Massachusetts, relatively white (86% on average) and affluent. More important than the means are the ranges of these variables, many of which are directly pertinent to the theoretical expectations. For example, our sample has tremendous variation in terms of residential density (237 to nearly 17,000 people per square mile), housing prices (\$200K to \$1.2MM), population growth (0% to 11% from 2010-2015), and age (9% to 28% over 65).

Table 1: Traits of cities and towns for which we have participation data

	mean	min	max
Population	25772	4427	183382
Population Density	1976	237	16880
Population Growth 2010-2015	5	-0	11
Median Age	42	24	53
Percent Over 65	15	9	28
Percent White	86	17	98
Percent Black	2	0	15
Percent Hispanic	5	0	76
Median Household Income	97650	34852	199519
Median House Price	431844	205200	1170400
Distance from Boston (miles)	24	4	43
Observations	97		

To assemble our dataset, we downloaded all available public hearing minutes for local Planning Boards and Zoning Boards. In all cities and towns, these are the two bodies responsible for reviewing any housing developments not permitted “by right” under local zoning code. Such housing projects were publicly reviewed by one or both bodies in such cases. In many of these meetings, owners or developers are petitioning for “variances” (exceptions) to the underlying regulations. Under Chapter 40A in Massachusetts, all public hearings for such bodies are published in “a newspaper of general circulation in the city

or town once in each of the two successive weeks, the first publication to be not less than fourteen days before the day of the hearing.” Cities/towns also are required to post a notice “in a conspicuous place in the city or town hall” with similar advanced notice. Moreover, the city/town also must mail a notice of a public hearing to “parties of interest,” which are defined as “the petitioner, abutters, owners of land directly opposition on any public or private street or way, and abutters to the abutters within three hundred feet of the property line of the petitioner as they appear on the most recent applicable tax list” (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2017). We utilized all minutes that were posted on cities’ and towns’ websites.

The public hearings in our database covered a wide range of policy areas, ranging from the construction of large multifamily or mixed use housing developments with hundreds of rental units to the addition of wireless communication towers. We substantively focus on all hearings on housing developments featuring the construction of more than one unit of housing. Even within this more limited policy category, public meeting minutes exhibit enormous variation. Some of these projects are relatively small (e.g. a family seeking to add an “in law” apartment) while others are expansive proposals from large professional development companies. Some meetings feature comments from one neighbor who shows up to support his friend in obtaining a variance from local zoning regulations. Others, in contrast, are filled with dozens of comments from residents with deep concerns about a proposed project.

Using these minutes, we created a database of all public comments surrounding the development of more than one housing unit. Each observation—which is at the comment level—includes the name and address of the meeting participant.<sup>1</sup> We also code whether the individual supports, opposes, or is neutral about a proposed housing project. Finally, when available, we also include a code describing the reason the participant expressed her

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<sup>1</sup>If an individual speaks multiple times at a meeting about *different* housing developments, she receives one observation per housing project. If participant makes multiple comments about the same project at the same meeting, her comments are concatenated into one observation. Finally, if the same individual attends multiple meetings to comment about the same project, she is coded as one observation per meeting.

support/opposition/neutrality. These reasons encompassed a wide variety of topics, including parking, environmental concerns, traffic, density, affordability, noise, aesthetics/history, property values and septic systems, among others.<sup>2</sup> A full codebook describing these categories and criteria for inclusion is included in the appendix. Because some of the meeting minutes provide extraordinary detail—including in some cases exact transcripts of proceedings—we are also able to also analyze valuable qualitative data.

Even without merging these data with any other information, we are able begin making valuable observations. Because each public comment is an observation, we can calculate the proportion of meeting attendees who are repeat participants (and how many meetings these individuals attend). Moreover, we can learn the proportion of individuals who support/oppose the development of additional housing and the reasons they typically cite.

What’s more, because we have the names and addresses of these individuals, we can merge them with data from the Massachusetts voter file to learn more about their demographics. Using a fuzzy matching algorithm, we link meeting commenters with registered MA voters.<sup>3</sup> We were able to match 2,744 of the 3,327 people in the set of participants (82.5%). As many people commented more than once, we were able to match the speakers of 84% of the comments to the voter file.

The voter file offers some important demographic data about these meeting participants, and allows us to compare these individuals to city/town-level demographics. In particular, the voter file provides data on individuals’ age, gender, partisanship, history of voter turnout in elections at all levels, and registration date at current address (which we use as a rough proxy for duration of residence). While this analysis obviously will not convey us a complete picture of (un)representativeness—it does not include income or race, most notably—it does

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<sup>2</sup>Intercoder reliability checks showed that coders agreed 100% of the time about whether a comment should be labeled support/oppose/neutral. They selected the same set of 19 total topic categories 85% of the time.

<sup>3</sup>We matched on name and address, the only data on participants available. Due to a large number of typos and misspellings, we used a fuzzy string matching algorithm and manual review of the matches. A majority of the people who we were unable to match are likely in the voter file, but could not be matched due to name duplication and missing addresses.

offer unprecedented insight into participants in local democratic proceedings.

### 3 Results

We begin by using the voter file to compare those who participated in local meetings to those in their towns who did not. Table 2 presents the difference in means between commenters and non-commenters. On average, meeting participants are older, have lived at their residence for longer (proxied by the length of their voter registration at that location), and are more likely to be men. Women constitute 51.3% of the voter file, but only 43.5% of the commenters at development meetings. We find no differences in partisanship. Democrats, Republicans, and Independent/Unaffiliated voters do not participate at different rates. There are significant differences based on vote history. The individuals who participated in development meetings voted at roughly twice the frequency of those who did not.<sup>4</sup>

Table 2: Difference in Means Between Commenters and All Voters

Variable	Commenters		Non-Commenters		Difference
	N	Mean	N	Mean	
Age	2,530	58.675	1,535,556	50.893	7.782**
Reg. Length	2,544	17.353	1,618,411	11.828	5.525**
Female	2,544	0.435	1,618,411	0.513	-0.078**
Reg. Democrat	2,544	0.321	1,618,411	0.317	0.004
Reg. Republican	2,544	0.112	1,618,411	0.111	0.001
Reg. Independent	2,544	0.564	1,618,411	0.563	0.001
Voted in 2016 General	2,544	0.783	1,618,411	0.628	0.155**
% Elections Voted	2,544	0.500	1,618,411	0.272	0.228**

Table 3 presents logit models using the full voter file, where the dependent variable is an indicator of whether or not the resident participated in a development meeting. The first specification includes only individual-level variables, the second includes town-level controls

<sup>4</sup>% Elections Voted is calculated as the share of elections between 2010 and 2016 in which in individual voted. The total number of possible elections varies by town.

(town averages for each individual variable), and the third includes town-level fixed effects. The results are consistent across all three specifications.<sup>5</sup> Voters are more likely to participate when they are older, have lived in the same address for longer, and vote more frequently. Female voters are less likely to participate, and we observe no partisan differences. These results broadly confirm that meeting participants are demographically unrepresentative of their towns in ways consistent with our theoretical predictions.

Table 3: Logit Models of Commenters Relative to Full Voter File

VARIABLES	(1) All Towns	(2) All Towns	(3) All Towns
Age	0.005** (0.001)	0.003* (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)
Reg. Length	0.012** (0.002)	0.019** (0.002)	0.017** (0.002)
Female	-0.384** (0.040)	-0.397** (0.040)	-0.400** (0.040)
Reg. Democrat	0.042 (0.069)	0.105 (0.070)	0.114 (0.070)
Reg. Independent	0.109 (0.064)	0.145* (0.065)	0.154* (0.065)
% Elections Voted	2.200** (0.075)	2.035** (0.076)	2.071** (0.077)
Observations	1,538,086	1,538,086	1,538,086
Towns	97	97	97
Town Controls		X	
Town FEs			X

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

One key independent variable that we cannot assess using the voter file is homeownership. While we are unable to collect homeownership data for the thousands of commenters in our data, we match the 85 individuals who participated in the Town of Arlington’s Zoning and

<sup>5</sup>We also examined various subsample models, including restricting the data to towns with at least 15 commenters. Such restrictions do not have any meaningful effect on the results.

Planning Board meetings with data from the Registry of Deeds. We selected the Town of Arlington because: (1) the relatively high number of comments (122 comments from 85 individuals) in the town allowed us to make reliable comparisons with town-level demographics and (2) the town has a large number of homeowners and renters (39% of the population are renters and 61% homeowners). We find that, consistent with our predictions, homeowners are significantly overrepresented as meeting participants; while 39% of the town are renters, they only comprise 22% of participants.

Next, we assess the proportion of meeting attendees in our full data set who participated in multiple meetings. Somewhat in contrast with our predictions, most participants only attended a single meeting. 83% of the commenters in our sample spoke at only one meeting. The average person made 1.3 comments, and 45 people made five or more comments. Among the participants that we matched to the voter file, the only significant predictor of the number of comments made is political party. Democrats were less likely to make multiple comments, and Republicans were more likely to do so.

Turning to the positions expressed within the set of people who participate in development meetings, the overwhelming majority of attendees spoke out in opposition to proposed new housing. 62.5% of all comments were in opposition to proposed housing projects, while only 14.6% expressed support; the remaining 22.8% of comments were neutral. These results strongly suggest that, as predicted, the incentives to show up and oppose new housing are far stronger than those to participate in support.

We also use individual-level variables to predict which participants are most likely to oppose new housing. Table 4 presents the results of this analysis. Consistent with theoretical predictions, those who appeared at multiple meetings are more likely to speak in opposition. Frequent voters are more likely to speak in support than to be neutral or oppose. Women are also less likely to support a project, and more likely to be neutral or oppose it. Democrats are more likely to support projects and less likely to be neutral or oppose them than independent or Republican participants. This last finding is consistent with Democrats having more

progressive views on housing (Marble and Nall 2017), but contrasts with much of the media coverage on the NIMBY movement, which suggests that NIMBYism is particularly prevalent among progressives (Capps 2015; Paul 2015). Our results suggest that, within the progressive places facing housing crises likely to engender NIMBYism, Republicans are more likely show up to meetings in opposition to new housing.

Table 4: Logit Models of Commenter Positions

VARIABLES	(1) DV=Support	(2) DV=Neutral	(3) DV=Oppose	(4) DV=Neutral or Oppose
Age	0.006 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.003)	-0.006 (0.005)
Reg. Length	0.003 (0.005)	-0.013** (0.005)	0.008 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)
Female	-0.269** (0.099)	0.020 (0.081)	0.126 (0.071)	0.269** (0.099)
Reg. Democrat	0.463** (0.163)	0.132 (0.141)	-0.372** (0.120)	-0.477** (0.163)
Reg. Independent	-0.049 (0.158)	0.223 (0.130)	-0.155 (0.112)	0.035 (0.158)
% Elections Voted	0.657** (0.156)	0.168 (0.129)	-0.465** (0.112)	-0.647** (0.155)
Number of comments	-0.029 (0.028)	-0.046 (0.025)	0.050* (0.021)	0.029 (0.028)
Observations	3,569	3,569	3,569	3,569

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

Finally, we also investigate the reasons individuals cited expressing their support/opposition on housing projects. While many meeting minutes simply noted whether participating individuals supported or opposed a project, some provided greater detail—in some cases exact transcripts of individuals’ comments. Figure 5 lists the top ten reasons given by position taken.

Perhaps the most striking result is the variety of reasons offered, including flood suscepti-

Table 5: Top 10 Reasons Given by Position Taken

Support	Neutral	Oppose
Aesthetics (11.1%)	Environment (14.3%)	Traffic (23.1%)
Density (9.7%)	Septic/Water (8.2%)	Environment (18.6%)
Affordability (9.5%)	Flooding (7.0%)	Flooding (14.9%)
Environment (9.3%)	Traffic (6.6%)	Safety (14.8%)
Neighborhood Character (6.9%)	Aesthetics (5.6%)	Density (11.9%)
Parking (5.6%)	Parking (4.2%)	Aesthetics (11.9%)
Traffic (5.3%)	Pedestrian Impact (3.5%)	Septic/Water (10.9%)
Home Values/City Finances (5.3%)	Safety (3.4%)	Neighborhood Character (10.5%)
Pedestrian Impact (5.0%)	Non-Compliance (3.3%)	Parking (9.9%)
Diversity (5.0%)	Home Values/City Finances (3.2%)	Non-Compliance (7.1%)

bility, septic systems, environmental concerns, neighborhood character, and parking, among other things. Moreover, there are striking differences in the reasons provided by supporters and opponents. Supporters of new housing, for example, were significantly more likely to mention affordability concerns. Opponents, in contrast, were more likely to raise traffic, environmental, flooding, and safety concerns.

The reasons cited suggest that, at least across some types of issues, commenters raise issues that reflect the contexts in which their communities are situated. Almost 11% of opposing comments mention septic systems, wells, and town sewers, reflecting the challenges their community faces in providing water to all residents; many of these water system comments highlight specific problems the resident has faced with his/her water pressure or water contamination, among other issues. Similarly, almost 15% of comments opposing new housing mention flooding concerns, and most of these cited specific instances of water in basements, yards, or nearby streets.

The content of these comments also allows us to qualitatively capture the knowledge and expertise of these commenters. First, many commenters cited their professional backgrounds in law, design, engineering, architecture, and real estate in making assessments of housing projects that personally affected their communities. In addition, the content of many of their comments suggested an extraordinary familiarity with highly complex local land use



regulations. Commenters would frequently cite specific statutes in arguing that a particular project was not in compliance with local zoning regulations. One commenter in Arlington “inquired about setbacks, the parking reduction bylaw, and whether the project would go before the Commission.” An engineer in the town of Andover critiqued a developer’s traffic study and stormwater analysis: “He stated that as an engineer he knows what kinds of games can be played with numbers. He gives no credibility to these counts. He added that Merrimack College traffic is not de minimus....He asked for a written report from the DPW on the impacts of proceeding with the facility.” Participants in these meetings frequently displayed a high level of knowledge—often derived from their own professional backgrounds—they used when engaging in local political proceedings.

## 4 Policy Impact

These results come with important caveats. Most significantly, we cannot observe how these meeting participants (or equivalent individuals) engaged in local democracy prior to the institutional push for public hearings that involved neighborhoods. In other words, we cannot simply conduct an elegant differences-in-differences approach to derive the impact of institutional changes on political participation. Nonetheless, we believe that the descriptive results above, in concert with strong theoretical expectations, suggest that public hearings on housing have largely been captured by high participating demographically unrepresentative individuals who disproportionately oppose the construction of new housing. Given the affordability and sustainability crises facing many American cities and towns, this participatory bias presents a potentially serious obstacle to promulgating important policy change.

Meeting participants can be impactful in several different ways. First, their arguments at face value may persuade local officials against approving new housing development. Second, signaling significant opposition may lead elected officials to worry about electoral consequences and appointed officials to worry about losing their jobs as a consequence of pres-

sure on elected superiors. Third—and perhaps most importantly—frequent attendance at meetings in some instances indicates citizens’ willingness to pursue legal challenges against developers and/or the city/town. Multiple individuals in our data set attended meetings with lawyers or identified themselves as lawyers opposing projects in a personal capacity. In a few cases, we were able to match individuals in our data set with lawsuits filed in the Massachusetts Land Court on the development in question. Given the importance of lawsuits as a key avenue for stymying development (Glaeser and Ward 2009), such implied threats (or actual lawsuits) can have a potent impact.

Multiple interviews with local developers, lawyers, and city/town officials suggests that this public opposition to housing development is critical. One local affordable housing lawyer critiqued the Massachusetts system’s emphasis on transparency as propagating exclusion: the towns are “controlled by older and richer people than the town as a whole, and it’s bad! Under the guise of making things more transparent, [we] end up creating a much more exclusive system than would otherwise exist.” A housing consultant recounted that, in her experience, neighbors’ opposition typically resulted in money for neighbors, delay, and/or changes to the project—all of which render the project more expensive. A Planning Board member in a MA town similarly highlighted delay as a frequent outcome of neighborly opposition: she “typically wouldn’t deny a project because of public opposition, but would slow it down a lot.” Another Planning Board official from a different town described a recent project delayed by months as a consequence of “older” opponents “concerned about parking.” These delays are consequential. As another housing lawyer put it: “delay is the biggest enemy of development....the ability of anyone to delay development is the ability to kill it.”

Another potential limitation of our analyses is that all of our data are from one state: Massachusetts. It is possible that Massachusetts’ town meeting tradition and strong local zoning control lead to a particularly unrepresentative set of citizens who engage to oppose new housing development (or especially likely to have a policy impact). While we are unable

to rigorously quantify meeting participation in other states, anecdotal evidence suggests that these trends hold, at least to some extent, elsewhere. Here we highlight one case with a differing institutional and socioeconomic context: Milwaukee, WI.

While NIMBYism has been well-documented in coastal cities like Boston and San Francisco, comparatively less media and scholarly attention has focused on whether opposition to higher density holds in struggling communities like deindustrializing Milwaukee—which, unlike many of our MA cities/towns, is governed by a strong mayor system rather than a town meeting. Nonetheless, at least in pockets of the city, media accounts and comments from local officials suggest that an unrepresentative group of neighbors dominate public hearings in similar ways that we observe in eastern Massachusetts. On multiple occasions, after attending hearings concerning housing developments in gentrifying parts of the city, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett has remarked, “I didn’t realize everyone on the East Side was an architect” (Jannene 2014). An interview with a Milwaukee alderman confirmed that the mayor used this comment repeatedly and was struck by “well-informed design critiques from professors” at local community meetings. The alderman noted at his community meetings that there were “a lot of regulars” and that he “know[s] who I’m going to run into....architects and lawyers. Lawyers show up in lawyerly manner.” He also believed—as we found in our limited quantitative data analysis—that a disproportionate share of meeting attendees were homeowners, not renters.

Perhaps more importantly, the Milwaukee alderman—like the individuals interviewed in Massachusetts—believed that the individuals who attended these meetings had important policy impact. He noted that “the voices of abutters carry a lot of weight,” in how he voted on a development project and that, in some cases it “only takes one voice” to influence a project. Local political bloggers similarly highlighted cases of neighborhood opposition delaying projects by months (Jannene 2012, 2014).

## 5 Prescriptions for Local Democracy

This paper has uncovered two related forms of bias. The first is that an unrepresentative group of high participators is disproportionately likely to participate in public meetings surrounding housing development. The second is that the concentrated costs and diffuse benefits of housing development spur a group of highly affected individuals to both participate and oppose new housing.

The first can potentially be addressed with measures that help to mitigate disparities in participation. In particular, policymakers should do more to include renters in the housing development process. While there is some evidence that renters exhibit hostility towards housing development (Hankinson 2017), Marble and Nall (2017) find that renters exhibit more progressive attitudes towards new housing compared with homeowners. One way to enhance renter participation is to ensure that they are aware of developments in their community. In Massachusetts, notices are mailed to property-owning abutters. In other words, notices are sent to landlords, not their tenants who actually reside in the abutting properties (e.g. Town of Arlington 2016). In many cases, then, individuals who live nearby may not even be aware of proposed housing developments. Fung (2006) notes that, for institutions of empowered participation to operate effectively, they must be structured in ways that encourage participation by *all*.

The bias towards opposition is harder to address, in part because it is normatively murkier whether it is problematic that the most affected individuals are the most likely to participate and oppose projects. While there are broader negative societal consequences of failing to increase the supply of housing, the era of developer-dominated politics suggests that completely ignoring abutters' concerns also yields potentially suboptimal outcomes. Policymakers might consider restructuring public hearings to encourage greater deliberation and genuine responsiveness to participating interlocutors (Fung 2006; Gutmann and Thompson 2012). Of course, genuine deliberation requires the representation of all sides of a debate. With over 60 percent of comments in opposition to new housing, it is difficult to imagine

a well-informed back-and-forth policy discussion surrounding many of the housing developments in many of these meeting minutes.

Finally, these meetings raise important questions about the level of expertise needed to participate in public deliberation (Fung 2006). Many of the commenters exhibit a high level of specialized knowledge about local land use and zoning. On the one hand, this bias towards high knowledge could dissuade some underrepresented voices from speaking up at meetings. On the other, as a society, we may want individuals to have a base level of knowledge about local land use prior to participating in important policy debates surrounding housing.

While this paper has uncovered some troubling participatory biases in public meetings, these issues do not necessarily mean that neighborhood-level politics are inherently unrepresentative. Scholars have identified other policy arenas where these meetings do appear to significantly enhance the participation of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (Fung 2006). Moreover, a developer-dominated system like the one that existed prior to the movement towards neighborhood participation is unlikely to yield significantly better outcomes in terms of affordability. We hope that future research can build upon our descriptive findings to improve the functionality of these public meetings and that political scientists and policymakers alike can learn important lessons about implementing higher quality democracies from these meeting minutes.

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# Appendix

## Comment Coding

Every time a public participant at a zoning or planning meeting was identified by name and address, and spoke about a project that implicated multiple housing units, we coded a) their information, b) information about the address of the project they spoke about, c) whether they were supportive, neutral, or opposed and, when they gave reasons or asked questions about topics that fit into one of our 20 categories. The two major coding decisions were a) how to code the participant's tone and b) how to code their reasons.

**Tone** The support/neutral/oppose variable is coded support or oppose if the coder can detect any hint in either direction. Most supportive comments were quite explicit and included phrases such as “I support this project,” and “this is good for the town” Oppose comments fell into two categories. Some explicitly expressed opposition in general: “this is bad for the town,” “I’m opposed to this project.” Other comments coded “oppose” focused on specific reasons (see below) with a negative tone or valence: “I’m worried about traffic,” “it will make the street more dangerous,” or “it doesn’t fit the neighborhood.” Comments coded neutral were generally sincere, or at least neutrally phrased questions. Asking “How will this affect the wildlife” would be coded neutral. Many of these neutral comments likely came from skeptical or even opposed residents who couched their views in a formally neutral question. We coded these as neutral rather than try to guess or assume why they were asking about things with a negative valence. This should make the coding reasonably conservative.

**Content** When possible, we coded the substance of each commenter using the scheme depicted in Table 6. We allowed for multiple content areas per commenter such that a person who raised both traffic and environmental concerns would get both comment codes.

Table 6: Comment issue coding scheme

Density	Arguments that the new development will make the population too dense in the area
Height/Shadows	The building will be too tall/short and will cast unacceptable shadows. Includes arguments about wind from the building (often a result of the height)
Parking	Too much strain on parking, proposal doesn't account for enough parking.
Traffic	Vehicular traffic only (not pedestrian)
Schools	Arguments that the development will harm/improve/influence the quality of the local public schools
Affordability	Arguments about the development increasing housing prices, including affordable housing, etc. includes income diversity
Diversity	Arguments about impact on diversity. Includes disabilities (handicap accessible)
Flooding	Construction may lead to flooding either during or after. Project may affect drainage
Building Foundation	Construction will damage the foundation of neighboring buildings
Noise	Construction causing noise or the development making the area noisier
Privacy	New housing too close with views into property and other related concerns
Trees/Green Space/Environment	Arguments about trees, parks, green space, wildlife, and environmental impact, includes air pollution concerns
Aesthetics	"It's ugly" "it doesn't match the other buildings" "building doesn't fit" Includes arguments about visual and historic character of area.
Not compliant with zoning	Complaining the development does not comply with zoning laws (often argue that zoning laws are agreed to after a collective participatory process, therefore should not be ignored)
Safety	Raises safety concerns about children, snow removal, intersections etc.
Pedestrian	Includes pedestrian/bicycle traffic. Also sidewalk issues
Neighborhood Character	To show difference between density and explicit fears of socioeconomic/racial diversity, arguments about preserving history and questions of "fit" that are not about the building itself. Concerns about who will be moving into the neighborhood and using neighborhood resources; arguments that this is a "great addition to the neighborhood." Arguments about "changing" the neighborhood
Home value/city revenues	Includes arguments about a development decreasing property values and reducing city revenues, "hurting my property values" or questions about whether a property will be a "net financial gain for the city"
Septic/water system	Only applies to suburbs without sewer systems.
Corruption	Comments about unethical dealings, corrupt officials, developers cheating residents. Requires more than saying that developers have not listened to residents